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ABSTRACT

Studies of emergent, previously unstudied groups in the context of a complex urban society (such as the Project on Working Women, a three-year study of women in nontraditional blue collar and working class jobs) present methodological problems related to sampling, interviewing, and methods of analysis. Crucial to a successful methodology are several factors: (1) the legitimacy of the researcher and his or her capacity to gain access to the sample population (since the population of working blue collar women is isolated and nonhomogeneous, the researcher's reputation and known sympathy to such women are helpful in gaining access to respondents through agencies and establishing credibility with the women respondents): (2) data-gathering strategies which include shared understandings of the research goals and respondent characteristics among the interviewers, and more than one interview so that openness and systematic data collection can occur simultaneously: and (3) approaches to data analyses which are flexible and dovetail with multiple interviews, using multiple methods of measurement. Combining these factors provides a good first step to revealing salient issues relevant to specialized urban populations. (KC)

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Methodological Issues in the Study of Specialized Urban Populations: Women Employed in Working Class and Blue Collar Occupations

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Introduction

Robert Park, the important sociologist of the city, contributed to our earliest perspectives on urban life by making two key observations about modern cities. The first observation, for which his work is best remembered had to do with the natural areas or zones of the city. The second, frequently overlooked one was his notion that the functional interrelationships of urban life are not spatial but rather interdependencies developed through work. Park emphasized the extent to which spatial patterns mitigated against intimacy and how the nexus of associations appears to center at work.

Although Park represents an historically specific perspective on urbanism his original concerns with emergent patterns of urban life continue to have relevance to contemporary emergent urban populations. For such populations traditional patterns of behavior and being are no longer relevant and so movement into / new patterns of participation in social and economic life is a growing reality. One such emergent population in our society is women, particularly women in the paid labor force. The rates and types of employment patterns of women have been slowly increasing and shifting with the virtual demise of the home based economic contributions women have traditionally made in society. With the demise of the home based economy has come the emergence of large numbers of women into the paid labor force and with it a period of some uncertainty and confusion. Paid employment is increasingly becoming the work and relationship center for women, rather

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than the family, and with this shift we can see a whole set of problems and challenges peculiar to emergent populations.

Of particular interest sociologically are those women who are moving into paid employment in positions previously dominated by men. There has been a good deal of work on professional women in such circumstances but the research with which we are engaged focusses on the motivations and experiences of women in nontraditional blue collar and working class jobs. After providing you with a very brief overview of our three year study, I intend to zero in on some of the methodological problems involved in the study of emergent, previously unstudied groups in the context of a complex urban society. These problems include issues related to sampling, interviewing and methods of analysis.

What Are We Studying?

The Project on Working Women is a three year study funded by the Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems, National Institutes of Mental Health. The goals of the study are many. It is first of all an effort to reveal the life experience of a previously understudied group of women; women characteristically defined as working class or blue collar. However, our concern is that we study women who we can define by the work they do rather than through their husband's employment and so we are in truth studying women in working class and blue collar employment. The vast majority of working women in this country are in such skilled and semiskilled work but the literature on work and on women pays very little attention to them. A primary concern is to understand the significance and meaning of work, or more directly paid employment in women's lives; the factors involved in career choices; the impact and development of skills and work values and

the way in which women integrate work roles with other roles they play. To accomplish this our interviews have been exploratory in nature and in depth conversations with 117 women working in jobs like cosmetologist or fork lift operator in San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

A second major goal of this study is to take a special look at women who are moving into nontraditional areas in the skilled trades and crafts such as welding, carpentry, or auto mechanics. We are interested in learning how these women differ from women making more traditional vocational choices both personally and in their opportunities and general social and economic circumstances. We are also interested in the extent to which formal and informal processes of counseling and training facilitate both entry and longevity in nontraditional employment.

There are certain underlying assumptions, biases, if you will, affecting this research effort. The first is that the seriousness of paid employment to the economic livelihood and self concepts of women in this society has not been given sufficient recognition by laypeople or social scientists. The second is a concern with stereotypic images of working class life and employment which pervade the sociological literature and a good deal of working class ideology usually held by middle class intellectuals. The third is a concern with imposing a framework of interpretation and analysis on this little researched but overinterpreted social group which will violate their experience or miss crucial aspects of that experience. As a consequence of all of these, the Principal Investigator put aside all of her previous training in survey research and analysis, and tried, with humility and uncertainty, to assume the stance of the anthropologist approaching a new society. However, with this there are certain problems given my interests are in twentieth century emergent populations in western

cities. Thus, strategies for locating respondents, developing an open interview format and looking at data have had to be adaptive. These strategies have to some extent been informed by the literature but, to be honest, represent on the spot responses to the shifting realities of field research in a complex urban society. Nonetheless they are interesting and possibly relevant to other researchers in the field.

Sampling

The sociological tradition suggests the need for a "representative" sample. The Anthropological, and what in sociology is referred to as the Ethnomedological tradition suggests the need for a complete immersion in the culture, life space, common sense understandings and meanings of the group one is studying. What does one do however if the category of experience with which one is concerned represents an emergent phenomenon about which little is already known and which cannot be isolated spatially or as a distinctive social grouping or subculture? Women in nontraditional blue collar employment represent a collection of apparently separate, often times isolated, individual women, living and working in spatially separated neighborhoods and employment settings. Some have had passing contact with what might be called a kind of subculture, the women's movement and the agencies to which it has given rise. But for the most part these women are separate and unknown in terms of even the most basic demographic characteristics. Nonetheless, the perspective of the social scientist suggests that such apparently separate private events/phenomenon have their roots in public/social issues and trends and so one begins to seek out the commonalities in experience but first one must locate respondents.

Researchers such as Whyte and Liebow provided us with insight into specialized urban populations by spending time in street corner neighborhoods; LeMasters and Cavan spent time in bars and gained insights into that culture. This researcher began by involving herself with institutions which had frequent contact with women interested in nontraditional employment be they as feminist originated counseling and training agencies or as major employers of blue collar workers recently identified as employing women. What is crucial and different from previous research is the significance of the "agency connection" if you will. As there are no natural gathering spots or street corners or employment centers for direct contact with potential respondents one must initially reach responderts through some kind of agency with which they have had some form of contact. Winning both the confidence of the agency and eventually of the individual respondent was crucial for reaching our specialized population. The researcher had to be seen as a friendly person even an "insider" to both. The interests and needs of both are often quite different however. This capacity to have a feeling for, interest in and responsiveness to the potentially conflicting needs and interests of multiple groups, to be a kind of chameleon, is becoming increasingly essential to the pursuit of research in a complex setting. It perhaps could be called the "Chameleon Strategy" for gaining respondents. In our research project gaining access to respondents has been a direct outgrowth of such various activities on the part of the Principal Investigator as being identified with a university continuing education program for women; giving speeches on women's changing role to as diverse groups as Catholic mothers's clubs and naval officers luncheons; participating in numerous television and newspaper interviews on women in general and on work in particular and generally developing a reputation prior to doing the actual research as an interested and sympathetic person. As such a person,

one gains access to names and addresses of employees, trainees or students and as such a person, one is not entirely unknown to the individual respondent when she is contacted with a request to interview for a study. Just as Whyte had to establish his legitimacy in the neighborhood, Cavan, hers in the bar; the researcher of emergent and spatially separated populations must establish legitimacy with the agencies or institutions with whom such persons come in contact in order to ultimately gain access to respondents.

The problem with the "chameleon strategy" is that the very activities and communications techniques which can give access can also doom one depending on the issue and the approach of the researcher. For example the increasing saliency of employment in women's lives and the inattention to it created an atmosphere in which a publicly identified interest in women and work was seen as a desirable thing. People have actually called us wanting to be interviewed. We have also had an 85% response to our letter requesting follow up interviews. If one wished to study something morally or politically more volatile such as the right to life movement, going public could be the worst possible strategy if one is identified with a "position" on the issue. Quiet association with the group itself may be a better strategy under such circumstances. This researcher for example, has interest in various understudied women's worlds such as elite volunteer groups or specialized work environments such as police and fire work. Association with such groups and individuals is often a source of disparagement from professional colleagues but, on the other hand, is essential if one wants access for in depth study. I guess my general point is that social scientists need to risk themselves personally and perhaps even professionally if they wish to gain access to the real world of previously unstudied or emergent

populations. This they must do through some form of engagement with the potential respondents in advance of the actual research relationship. Otherwise our work will continue to rely upon surveys which gloss over empirical complexities or theoretical constructions which lack a solid base in empirical data. Personal identification with the university may not always be the best means for identifying and gaining access to appropriate sample populations.

Interviewing

Studying persons living in a complex urban setting requires knowledge of numerous social structural characteristics which may impact on the life experience of the individual person. Lay people however are not trained to think or speak like social scientists, (thank god), and the common sense frameworks which they use to describe and interpret their experience are not always accessible or comprehensible to the usually middle class intellectual conducting research. The problem in open ended interviewing is thus to assess both individual and systemic factors of interest to the social scientist in a language and framework of understandings which makes sense to both the respondent and the researcher. Our earlier point about association with the group being studied is important here as well, for one does bring some shared concerns and understandings to the research interview or conversation. Nonetheless, assumptions a researcher would never make in the African bush country or with a subgroup whose language and culture is clearly distinct, such as in ethnic ghettoes, simply go unexamined when studying apparently clear urban issues. For example, the question of income and occupation seem perfectly straight forward to any person who has grown up being trained to answer questions (be they on multiple choice exams or College Entrance Board exams) to think in a temporal mode that is greater

than two weeks long and to be conscious of such things as fathers occupation and income as factors relevant to one's social position vis-a-vis peers. Such a life experience gives rise to the assumption that most people have stable, continuous work histories, have stable, usually constantly increasing earning power and plan for their future or at least have a clear sense of the long term future. And so one asks unreflectively what was your father's occupation while you were growing up? What is your average annual household income and gets virtually uncodeable responses. Did we ask the question poorly? After all the US Census and survey research data always report this kind of information. Do the respondents as women simply not know or concern themselves with such issues? Or is it that the continual shift in employment and income for significant sectors of the population make it difficult to pinpoint something like father's occupation. A more relevant piece of data may be something like..."he always had steady work."

Similarly when interviewing women we were concerned with their hopes and expectations for their children. Once again the literature on mobility and the values of this society suggest that status concerns and mobility concerns are quite real (one recalls the report by Gamson in the American Sociologist on the unusually high rates of upward mobility among sociologists) and so we expect complex ideas and aspirations and instead get "I want them to be happy". As middle class women having been posed with the notion that employment and family life are options and when combined create conflict we expect women to describe what they would do if they weren't working and find they have trouble even fantisizing a life without paid employment.

What these passing examples suggest is the need for a multi-staged interviewing strategy when studying emergent or understudied populations. Such groups should be interviewed at a minimum two times, ideally more.

The first interview should be treated as the first step in deciding the relevant areas of experiences and questions that make sense to the population under study or how to frame one's sociological concerns in terms or with references that make sense to the respondent. The second interview then allows for more relevant and systematic data collection. I am not simply arguing for pre-testing. I am arguing for an intensive interviewing or field experience, followed by complete transcribing, reading, coding and analyzing of data which thus leads naturally to a better interview approach in the second go around. This implies an approach to research in which funds, timetables and commitments from respondents involve more than a one shot interview. It involves a commitment to the research which has data collection, analysis and writing going on simultaneously and thus always imperfectly. This simultaneity is possibly essential if directions and ideas are to be continually tried out, evaluated and modified.

Another aspect of the interviewing process which needs more attention relates not so much to the content and flow of the interviews themselves as to the needs and values of the persons conducting the interviews and working with the data as it begins to unfold. All of us have heard stories of survey researchers who fill out questionnaires themselves in order to speed up interviewing; of lost data; of major coding errors. In exploratory interview studies of complex issues and groups which involve more than one person and his or her experience of, recording and interpretation of the data, there are numerous potential problems and risks to the research enterprise. The first problem is involving the interviewers from the beginning in the goals and assumptions and concerns of the research enterprise. Given the exploratory nature of research on emergent populations when more than one person is interviewing or eventually coding it is imperative that long discussions and sharing take place so there are common

understandings about the goals of the research and relevant comments in interviews are pursued for richness and irrelevant information is not pursued. The costs of not picking up the former are obvious in terms of relevance and validity for the research. The costs of the latter are not as obvious. The time and money lost in the transcription and preliminary analyses of interviews which are too much "off the wall" can set the research process back significantly. This means having some sense of what isn't important to explore as well as some sense of what is. It also means that it behooves the Principal Investigator to periodically review interviews conducted by staff to be sure their direction is germane, Whether interviews are being tape recorded or written out this checking is essential. Given the increasing complexity of urban life and thus of research on urban patterns, team approaches to even exploratory open ended research seem more likely and thus sharing in the basic conceptualization of the research is as important as training in good interviewing techniques.

As work with tape recorders becomes increasingly popular new methodological concerns pertinent to interviewing are also raised. Taped interviews can serve merely as a resource to return to from one's notes or as a resource for impressionistic summaries set down upon completion of an interview. My bias in studying emergent populations is to strive for a third usage--full transcriptions of interviews. If that is to be pursued there are some minor technical concerns with major research implications that should be noted. In my own research for example, in addition to the obvious problems of recording at too soft a volume, forgetting to turn cassettes and lost tapes, the problem of morale and fatigue among the clerical staff in charge of transcribing was not taken sufficiently into account. It was only weeks after most of the interviews had been typed up that we realized that after about the first forty word for word transcriptions the transcriber

began exercising increasing amounts of editorial discretion beginning with a word or two here and there; a question or probe here and there to the point where full fifteen minute sections were either summarized in the typists own words or ommited entirely from the transcription. As I had only been reading interview transcriptions and not listening to the tapes simultaneously it was not until the interviewers began the coding process that these editorial liberties emerged. It took more than two months of staff time, project money and cooperation to correct these changes. Morale was at an all time low needless to say but the corrections were essential in order to proceed accurately with our data analysis. Thus I would suggest two essential elements when interviewing and transcribing in this way; sensitivity to the hard work facing the support staff and a continuous system for checking for accuracy. (An additional point relevant to morale in this particular study is the fact that studying women in nontraditional jobs who make continual comments about how unsatisfying and degrading work like secretarial work is, eventually begins to get the valuable secretarial staff down.)

Data Analysis

Methods of data analysis also require adaptive approaches when studying emergent populations in an urban setting. On the one hand the researcher wants to give an intimate portrait of the life experience of a previously understudied or misunderstood group which has some validity. On the other, because there is a rich literature on experiences and respondents similar to the emergent group, the researcher is anxious to generate data that has some reliability for use in comparative statements and generalizations. After accomplishing the arduous task of beginning to identify relevant or meaningful areas of experience as offered by the respondents and beginning

to get a fix on the combinations of experiences and personal characteristics which subgroups of respondents have in common, the process of preliminary typology construction can begin. An important decision point however is whether the researcher should proceed with what might be called a horizontal or vertical approach to data analysis. By horizontal I mean an analysis which selects out a thin slice of the data, for example, job satisfaction, and investigates the various factors and correlations which seem to be relevant to an understanding of job satisfaction among all respondents. Such an analysis allows the researcher to develop generalizations based on some counts and minimal tests of significance and in some ways dialogue more directly with the relevant existing research and literature. The vertical approach represents a presentation of a series of life profiles (and is perhaps the more traditional Anthropological approach) in which the richness and uniqueness of particularistic life experiences is revealed. With this approach one can suggest implications for existing research and literature as well as generate research ideas for the future. One is less inclined to generalize from such vertical analyses because in such instances the uniqueness rather than the commonalities of experience are key.

Here again multi-stage interviewing is possibly the key to the researcher's capacity to simultaneously handle the desire for rich descriptive data and generalizations about central research variables. Second and third waves of interviews enable the researcher to go back to the respondent after initial analyses of open ended data and ask more open ended questions to fill out missing places and to begin the development of more structured questions; on areas of experience for which the researcher has confidence information in more quantitative forms is available.

Data gathering strategies should and can vary over time and with topics. The study of emergent populations in an urban setting virtually demands this kind of flexibility. Most of us, as researchers nonetheless are wedded to one method of data collection and analysis or another. In circumstances in which the size and homogeneity of the group and the scope of the problem is sufficiently bounded, in depth, participant studies of complete systems is possible. In a familiar culture where class and other social boundaries are not that great, and much reliable information is already available, survey approaches have their place. But, in urban settings, where the research questions pertain to relatively unknown, spatially and socially disparate individuals, methods must be multiple and adaptive so that the researcher can begin to get a preliminary sense of the relevant variables, the crucial individual characteristics and the key social processes operating. With enough time and multiple contacts and measures purer styles of research in later phases perhaps are warrented. However, the combination of unknownness and the complexity of research on urban life require this kind of flexibility in the early stages of research.

In closing I think it is important to emphasize how difficult it is to embark on a study of specialized urban populations which are emergent and spatially, culturally and socially disparate. The old methodologies provide clues on how to proceed but in a very real sense the strategies for reaching populations such as the one we are studying, or groups such as migrant workers or illegal aliens, battered wives or rape victims are ad hoc and vary in their success. Crucial to the successful ones, of which I'd like to believe ours is one, is 1) The legitimacy of the researcher and his or her capacity to gain access to the sample population 2) Data gathering strategies which include a) shared understandings of the research goals

and respondent characteristics among the interviewers and b) more than one interview so that openness and systematic data collection can occur simultaneously and 3) Approaches to data analyses which are flexible and dovetail with multiple interviews, using multiple methods of measurement. The combination of these factors provides a good first step to revealing the salient issues relevant to specialized urban populations.